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ABSTRACT

A survey of 155 midwestern movie viewers was conducted to determine the factors of the selective exposure and appeal of horror films. Audience members leaving the theatre after viewing "Halloween II" were interviewed using a questionnaire that contained measures of specific reasons for liking horror films as well as measures of several individual difference variables. Path analysis of the results revealed a model indicating two important factors in the appeal of horror films: the audience's desire to (1) see the destruction often found in these films, and (2) experience the satisfying resolutions they usually provide. Age was also an important predictor, with younger viewers enjoying horror films more than older viewers. The data failed to support the notion that "sensation seeking" was a strong determinant of horror's appeal. (Author/HTH)

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Selective Exposure to Horror:

An Analysis of the Audience for Frightening Films

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Abstract

A survey was conducted to determine the antecedents of the selective exposure and appeal of horror films. Audience members leaving the theater after viewing Halloween II were interviewed using a questionnaire that contained measures of specific reasons for liking horror films as well as measures of several individual difference variables. A model emerged from path analysis indicating that two important factors in the appeal of horror film's are the audience's desire to (1) see the destruction often found in these films, and (2) experience the satisfying resolutions they usually provide. Age was also an important predictor. Horror films were found to be enjoyed more by young viewers. The data failed to support the notion that "sensation seeking" was a strong determinant of horror's appeal.

Selective Exposure to Horror:
An Analysis of the Audience for Frightening Films

> . . . and though you fight to stay alive, your body starts to shiver, for no mere mortal can resist the evil of the thriller. (Temperton, 1982)

Of course, the thrill of a horror film is not irresistable to all people. In fact, it is probably easier to explain why some people dislike horror films so intensely than to explain why others seem to enjoy them so much. Few of us would question another's distaste for films that contain the type of graphic violence or induce the kind of fright and disgust created in many of today's horror films. In fact, this type of reaction would be considered a normal response to stimuli that produce negative affect. Quite the contrary, the hard part seems to be finding a reasonable explanation for the great popularity of such films. How could any rational person enjoy watching the realistic portrayal of a head exploding in a film like Scanners? Why would any sane person pay for a seat at a movie that they knew would scare them senseless? Over the years, this question has been debated more in the popular press than in academic journals. However, recent publications demonstrate a growing interest in the study of selective exposure to fear arousing stimuli by researchers concerned with the impact of viewing graphic violence and frightening media on individuals' perceptions and behaviors (e.g., Cantor & Reilly, 1982; Cantor & Sparks, in press; Tamborini, Zillmann, and Bryant, in press).

Several individual difference explanations have been advanced to explain the appeal of horror films to certain individuals. Psychotherapists have attempted to trace the appeal of this film genre to its ability to reach the individual's subconscious and provide psychic relief to internal conflicts by allowing the displacement of anxieties onto story materials (Goldsmith, 1975).

Social scientists have explained this phenomena as the "allurment of being scared out of one's wits," or as a learned behavior resulting from a pleasurable response to the arousal created by these films (Berlyne, 1967, 1973). Film critics have alternately suggested that the viewing public likes horror because it provides an escape from what is a boring reality for many (Ansen, Kasindorf, & Ames, 1979); because it provides a test of strength for the viewer who dares the film to "scare me" (Werner, 1980); or because watching the successful resolution of such terrifying scenarios gives us a good feeling (Rickey, 1982).

Intuitively, each of the above explanations seems to make some sense. The last proposition, that witnessing a successful resolution gives viewers pleasure, is consistent with dispositional explanations of reactions to other forms of media entertainment. Zillman (1980) suggests that an important element in deriving pleasure from suspenseful drama is the provision of a satisfying resolution. Typically, this type of resolution would be either a positive outcome for some liked protagonist, or a negative outcome for some disliked protagonist. In the absence of either of these, however, "the mere removal of the threat that produced empathetic distress in the first place may be considered a minimal stimulus condition for the cognitive switch from dysforia to euphoria" (Zillmann, 1980, p. 148). The concept is a simple one: We are aroused and upset by the threats of dire consequences presented during the course of the film. When a just ending is then provided, or, when the dreadful threats are removed, we experience this arousal in a pleasurable form.

According to Hallie (1969), this type of just ending has been a standard in tales of horror since its advent in eighteenth-century Gothic novels. Traditionally, the agent of horror ends up being defeated in some manner as terrible as the horror it has inflicted. Similarly, this formula has been the

rule in horror films since the 1930's when, for example, the mad scientist would realize his mistake and die in his successful effort to destroy the monster he had created (Sontag, 1966). Given this type of ending, a logical explanation of horror film's appeal would be that viewers enjoy seeing a successful resolution. Additionally, this might explain why so much graphic violence is tolerated and even enjoyed. Enjoyment in this situation is dependent on the provision of a negative outcome for the disliked protagonist. As the horrors inflicted by the protagonist increase, the intensity of dislike for the protagonist increases also. Consequently, when the protagonist is destroyed in the end, the pleasure derived should be even greater.

Unfortunately, there is no empirical evidence to support this as an explanation for selective exposure to horror films. Further, it has been suggested that horror films no longer provide this type of satisfying resolution (Rickey, 1982; Rosenbaum,1979). Rosenbaum (1979), claims that there has been a change in the basic format of horror films to one in which the ending no longer brings about the elimination of the menacing force, but results, instead, in the triumph of evil over the forces of reason. Starting with the success of movies in the early 1970's like Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist, horror films began to depart from the traditional happy-ever-after format to an unhappy-ever-after style. Instead, we now have films like Night of the Living Dead, Halloween, and Friday the 13th, in which defenseless victims come across blood-crazed zombies and lunatics in terrifying no-win situations. In light of the popularity of these films it becomes difficult to maintain that horror film audiences attend because they want a just ending and have learned to expect one. Thus, there must be some other reason for the great appeal of these films.

Perhaps a better explanation of this appeal deals with the thrill that horror films provide. It has been suggested that the jolt of horror is

exhilarating, and that it leaves people feeling invigorated. Rickey (1982) claims that "when we are afraid, adrenalin surges through our bloodstreams, accelerating our heartbeats and giving us a rush of energy. We're left feeling more alert, our senses operating at their peak" (p. 69). This type of reasoning is consistent with Berlyne's (1967) theories on arousal which state that "reinforcement, and in particular reward, can result in some circumstances from an increase in arousal" (p. 30). From this it can be postulated that arousal resulting from exposure to horror films can be experienced as rewarding, and that those who experience this type of arousal as rewarding would learn to seek out horror films for the gratifications they offer. The type of person who would react in this manner might be described as a sensation-seeker.

Zuckerman's (1979) Sensation-Seeking Scale measures the extent to which an individual is motivated to seek out environmental stimuli that produce "sensation" and arousal. Zuckerman identifies four dimensions of sensation seeking: (1) thrill and adventure seeking (TAS); (2) experience seeking (ES); (3) disinhibition (DIS); and (4) boredom susceptibility (BS). Using these dimensions to predict exposure to horror films, one might expect exposure to be positively correlated with TAS (a measure of the desire to do things that are frightening and dangerous) and DIS (a measure of the desire to break social restraints), while being negatively correlated with BS (a measure of the ease with which an individual gets bored with dull and predictable situations). ES (a measure of the desire to experience new situations and things) does not appear to have such a clear-cut relationship to this phenomenon, however, and may play little part in explaining the appeal of horror.

In an attempt to investigate the relationship between the appeal of horror films and sensation seeking, Sparks (1984) correlated the Sensation-Seeking Scale with his own 20 item scale designed to measure an individual's enjoyment

of frightening films. In this study, Sparks found an overall positive correlation between sensation seeking and enjoyment of frightening films. In particular, enjoyment was strongly correlated with TAS for males and with DIS for females. Sparks further reported that his measure of the enjoyment of frightening films was positively correlated with the self-reported frequency of attending horror films. In addition, this scale itself had three different dimensions: (1) enjoyment of arousal resulting from exposure to these films, (2) enjoyment of the graphic violence contained in these films, and (3) strong and enduring emotional reactions to the images in these films. Unfortunately, Sparks does not report the relationship between these individual dimensions and exposure to horror films. Thus, we can not discern the separate roles played by each of these dimensions in determining selective exposure to horror.

The present study was designed to further investigate this issue by looking at the relationship of several relevant individual difference measures with the enjoyment and selective exposure of horror films. To this end, a questionnaire was created to measure sensation-seeking, several commonly stated reasons for attending horror films, and the frequency of attending horror films. The questionnaire was administered to individuals following exposure to a horror film, and path analysis was conducted on item responses in an attempt to determine the antecedents of exposure to and enjoyment of this genre.

Method

Respondents

The survey respondents were individuals attending the film Halloween II at a local movie theater in Lansing, Michigan during the fall of 1982. A total of 155 individuals (78 male and 77 female) were interviewed leaving the theater following the movie. Respondents ranged from 15 to 45 years of age with an average age of 21 years.

Procedure

Trained interviewers waited outside the movie theater for audience members leaving the theater after watching Halloween II. After respondents agreed to participate in the study, interviewers administered a questionnaire by reading the items and item responses, and recording the subjects' answers. Following the interview, participants were thanked for their cooperation.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in the interview contained measures of horror film enjoyment and measures of several individual difference variables. The measures of horror film enjoyment were developed by administering an open-ended questionnaire to 26 males and 35 females enrolled in a communication course at a large Midwestern University during the fall of 1982. The questionnaire asked respondents to state the reasons why they liked or disliked horror films. The five most frequently cited reasons for liking or disliking horror films were extracted from the list of all responses. These five reasons were: (1) because they were exciting, (2) because they were scary, (3) because of the destruction and power in them, (4) because the good guy wins in the end, and (5) because of the humor in them. Five single-item measures of liking horror films were developed from these responses.

The questionnaire was in three parts. The first part consisted of the 40 items from Zuckerman's (1979) Sensation-Seeking Scale. The second part contained nine film-related items including: one item measuring attendance at films in general; one item measuring attendance at horror films in particular; and seven items measuring respondents' enjoyment of horror films. Five of these seven items were developed from the five statements concerning specific reasons for liking horror films. In addition, one statement indicated a general liking of horror films and another statement indicated a liking of the film that

respondents had just seen (Halloween II). Each item took the form of a positive statement reflecting the liking of horror films. For example, one item read "I like horror films because the good guy usually wins in the end." Measures were obtained using a response scale of "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." The final part of the questionnaire contained single-item measures of age, gender, occupation, education, and religiosity.

Results

The first step in the analysis was to investigate the empirical relationships among the measures used in the study. Inspection of the correlations among these variables revealed that three of the seven items measuring enjoyment of horror films were highly correlated. Because of their high intercorrelations and similarity in content, a confirmatory factor analysis was computed on these items. Factor loadings for these three items were estimated using the centroid method (Nunnally, 1967). This analysis indicated that these three items were measures of the same underlying factor. As a result, the three items were combined to form a single measure labled "like for fright." These items, their inter-item correlations, and their factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The reliability of this three item measure was alpha = .86.

Insert Table 1 about here

Confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted on the subscale scores for each of the four measures of Zuckerman's Sensation-Seeking Scale (TAS, DIS, ES, and BS). Response scores on three of these subscales, TAS, DIS, and ES, were highly intercorrelated. As a result, these three subscales were combined to form a second order factor labeled "sensation seeking." Factor loadings for

these three subscales were generated using the centroid method (Nunnally, 1967). The inter-factor correlations and their factor loadings are presented in Table 2. The reliability of this second order factor was alpha = .67.

Insert Table 2 about here

The two multiple-item measures, like for fright and sensation seeking, were united with:(1) single-item measures of age and gender, (2) three remaining single-item measures of liking horror films because of their "destruction," because of their "humor," and because the good guy wins in the end (the "just ending"), and (3) single-item measures of liking Halloween II, and of the frequency of attendance at horror films. A correlation matrix of these nine variables is presented in Table 3. In order to test the hypothesized relationships among these variables, a path analysis was conducted on these correlations. The data were analyzed using PACKAGE (Hunter, Cohen, & Nicol, 1975).

Insert Table 3 about here

Gender and age were hypothesized as antecedents to several of the individual-difference measures, and acted as exogenous variables in this model. Sensation seeking and the three single-item indices of liking horror films because of their destruction, humor, and just endings were hypothesized to be antecedents of an individual's like for fright, attendance at horror films, and liking of Halloween II. Finally, like for fright was hypothesized to be an antecedent of the liking of Halloween II and the frequency of attendance at horror films.

The path model depicted in Figure 1 emerged from this analysis. A matrix of reproduced correlations predicted by the path model is presented in Table 4.

A matrix of deviations (observed correlations minus predicted correlations) is presented in Table 5. Inspection of this table reveals that the sum of the squared deviations in this model is .10. Additionally, no deviation exceeds the 95% confidence interval established for its observed correlation. That is, no predicted correlation deviates from its corresponding observed correlation by more than one would expect due to sampling error alone. In sum, there is strong evidence to suggest that the data fit this model well.

Insert Figure 1 and Tables 4 & 5 about here

Inspection of this model reveals a number of interesting relationships among the measured variables. Consistent with earlier research (Sparks, 1984; Zuckerman, 1979), gender was found to be an important predictor of sensation seeking. Males scored higher on this measure than females. In addition to gender, age was also found to predict sensation seeking. Younger respondents were found to be greater sensation seekers than older respondents.

Similarly, age and gender were found to be predictive of reactions to horror. In line with observations by Handel (1955), age was an important predictor of attendance at horror films, as well as a moderate predictor of like for fright in general and liking Halloween II in particular. All three of these relationships indicate that younger respondents found horror to be more enjoyable than older respondents. With regard to gender, the liking of horror specifically for its destruction and its humor was more characteristic of males, while enjoying these films for their just endings was more typical for females.

Like for fright was strongly predicted by liking horror films specifically for their destruction and for their just endings, with liking horror films specifically for their humor being a very weak predictor of this. Sensation

seeking, a variable expected to be a strong predictor of like for fright, was found to be only a moderate to weak predictor here.

Finally, liking the film Halloween II and frequency of attendance at horror films were both predicted by like for fright. Liking Halloween II was strongly predicted by like for fright, as well as being marginally predicted by liking horror films for their destruction and for their just endings. Frequency of attendance at horror films was moderately predicted by like for fright and marginally predicted by liking horror films for their destruction.

Discussion

The model that emerges from this study fails to support the notion that thrill seeking is an important factor in the selective exposure to horror films. Instead, it suggests that the attraction to these films lies more in the audience's desire to see the destruction often found in them, and to experience the satisfying resolutions they usually provide. In addition, the data corroborate the generally accepted belief that this type of film is enjoyed more by younger viewers.

The failure of this study to demonstrate support for sensation seeking as a strong predictor of selective exposure to horror can be interpreted in different ways. First, it may be taken as an indication that the sensation provided by horror films is not an important determinant of this genre's appeal, and that the arousal created by the graphic violence in these films plays a small part in attracting an audience. It should be recognized, however, that the Sensation-Seeking Scale does not measure the appeal of arousal created by graphic violence and horror in particular. Further, it does not measure the appeal of simply being aroused. It measures only the appeal of participating in arousing behaviors. It is possible that arousal resulting from watching horror films is experienced quite differently than arousal resulting from

exhilarating activities. In view of this, the failure here to find sensation seeking an important determinant of liking horror may simply indicate that the type of thrill people seek from viewing horror films is somewhat different than the thrill derived from taking part in exciting behaviors.

A second factor that needs to be recognized when interpreting these data is that the participant sample came from a population of horror film fans. Thus, the data should be taken to indicate that the Sensation-Seeking Scale is not a good predictor of selective exposure or degree of liking frightening films within the population of horror fans. It is not unreasonable to expect that horror fans as a group score high on sensation seeking. In fact, subjects in this study averaged over seven out of a possible ten on TAS scores. This suggests that the range of the predictor variable, sensation seeking, was restricted in this sample. Such restriction in range would attenuate the correlations between sensation seeking and both selective exposure and liking of frightening films. Thus, these data should not be taken as an indication that sensation seeking is a poor predictor of horror's appeal within the larger population of film viewers. This issue remains to be investigated.

Perhaps more interesting than this study's failure to demonstrate sensation seeking as a strong predictor of horror's appeal is the indication that providing a just resolution plays an important part in determining an individual's like of frightening films. This finding is consistent with Zillmann's (1980) explanation of suspenseful drama's appeal. Typically, throughout a horror film the monster inflicts terrible suffering on its victims, and in the end there is a debt to be paid. When the good guy wins and the villian is destroyed, justice is served and the happy ending is provided. The curious part of this is that the happy ending often contains as much horror in the maiming and destruction of the monster as is contained in the monster's cruelty itself.

In fact, reciprocity in terms of repaying cruelty with pain seems to be the norm in tales of horror, and the data here suggest that the appeal of many horror films may depend on this.

The importance of this type of resolution in determining the appeal of horror films again raises a question about the popularity of films that fail to provide this kind of ending. What is the attraction to horror films in this situation? It may be that many horror films today continue to provide the standard resolution in which the monster is destroyed and the survivors, including the audience members, live happily-ever-after. In addition, some horror films that do not fit this category may still contain the "minimal stimulus condition" necessary for a satisfying resolution. For example, a satisfying resolution in a horror film may be quite different from the ending of a typical adventure film or drama. In the setting created by the horror film, a successful resolution may be simply the termination of the threat. Maturin (1966) states that "the drama of terror has the irresistible power of converting the audience into its victims" (p. 197). According to this reasoning, the viewers of horror film often mimic the pain and suffering of the victims on screen, and a successful ending may result not so much from the restoration of justice, but from getting the monster off the viewers' back. Thought of this way, most horror films may continue to provide the type of endings that audience members consider satisfying.

Still, in some films, even this "mere removal" of the threat is not provided. Unless you accept the movie's end as a satisfactory form of removal, the provision of a happy ending does not explain the appeal of movies like The Omen or The Exorcist. Perhaps the appeal of these films lies, instead, in the type of destruction contained in them. Consistent with the findings here, the graphic portrayal of destruction may be an important factor in selective exposure

to horror films. The reasons for this are not clear from the data presented here, however. King (1981) suggests that witnessing the destruction and graphic violence portrayed in these films provides a type of psychic relief by allowing our emotions to run free; something we rarely have the opportunity to do in today's society. He suggests that destructive antisocial tendencies are a part of all of us, and every now and then need to be let loose. The horror film "deliberately appeals to the worst in all of us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free" (p. 246). This reasoning suggests that watching the graphic violence in horror films provides us with a type of catharsis, or at least allows us to experience behaviors considered social taboos in the socially acceptable form of fictional horror.

Viewed in this way, horror films might be seen as performing a valuable service by appealing to normal tendencies found in each of us. Critics of this genre interpret the appeal of these films in a different manner, however. Watkins (1980) questions the mental stability of individuals to whom these films appeal stating that the audience and producers of horror films have begun to "accept demented revenge for violence as an art form" (p. 33). If it is the case that the graphic depiction of violence and destruction presented in these films appeals to individuals who are "sick," the effect of this exposure becomes the important issue. Of course, speculation on the impact of exposure to graphic horror would not be justified from the data presented here. It seems reasonable, however, to start looking for rationales concerning the effects of such films by investigating the characteristics of the individuals who like these films and the types of gratifications that they derive.

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Table 1

A table of inter-item correlations and factor loadings for the measure of like for fright.*

	1	2	3
1	.68		
2	.69	.68	
3	.67	.67	.68

*communalities in the diagonal

Item	Factor Loading
1. I like horror films	.83
2. I like horror films bacause they are exciting.	.83
3. I like horror films because they are scary	.83

alpha = .86

Table 2

A table of interfactor correlations and factor loadings for the measure of sensation seeking.*

	TAS	DIS	ES
TAS	.50		
DIS	.44	.39	
ES	.43	.37	.37

Item	Factor Loading
TAS	.70
DIS	.62
ES	.61

alpha = .67

* communalities in the diagonal

Table 3

The observed correlation matrix of variables in the study.

AGE	1.00								
SEX	-.05	1.00							
SENSATION	-.37	-.24	1.00						
DESTROY	-.08	-.27	.14	1.00					
JUST END	-.06	.18	-.10	.07	1.00				
HUMOR	-.04	-.14	.09	-.01	.02	1.00			
LIKE FRIGHT	-.20	-.12	.21	.41	.24	.09	1.00		
HALL II	-.28	-.04	.02	.25	.07	.14	.33	1.00	
FREQ. HORR.	-.21	-.06	.05	.30	.21	.10	.50	.20	1.00

Table 4

Matrix of reproduced (predicted) correlations.

AGE	1.00								
SEX	-.05	1.00							
SENSATION	-.37	-.24	1.00						
DESTROY	.01	-.27	.06	1.00					
JUST END	-.01	.18	-.04	-.05	1.00				
HUMOR	.01	-.14	.03	.04	-.03	1.00			
LIKE FRIGHT	-.15	-.10	.19	.37	.20	.09	1.00		
HALL II	-.26	-.05	.14	.22	.04	.02	.31	1.00	
FREQ HORR	-.17	-.05	.12	.26	.17	.04	.49	.19	1.00

Table 5

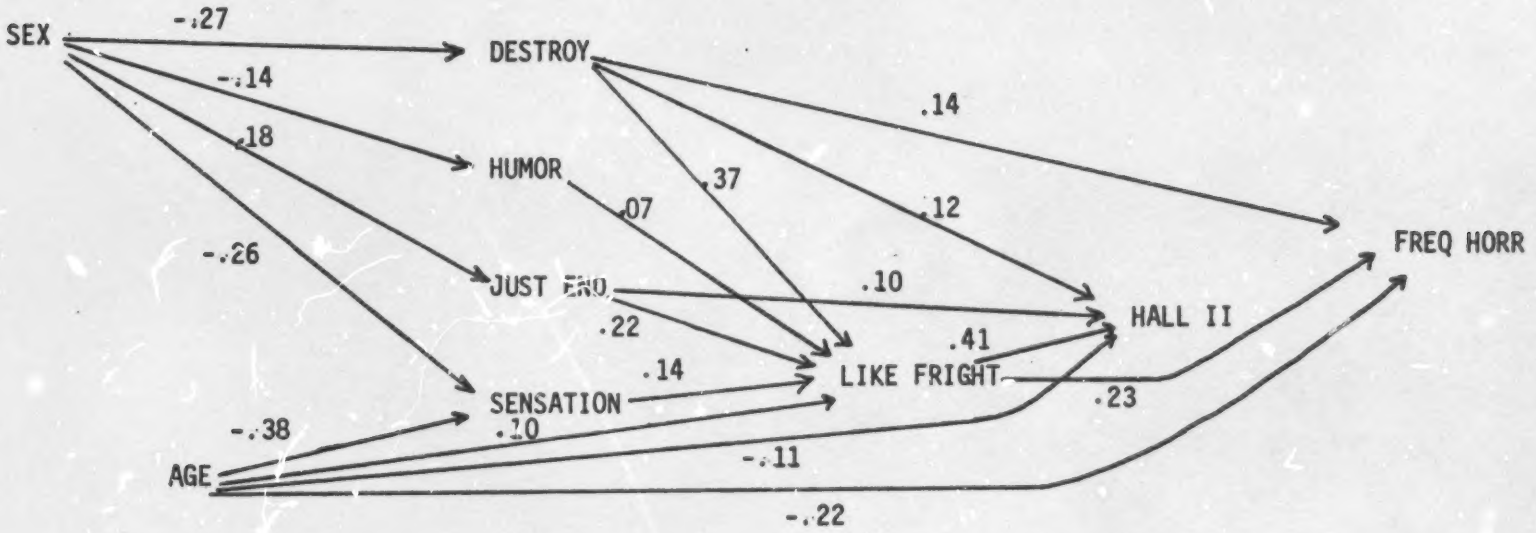
Deviation matrix (observed - predicted correlations).

AGE	-								
SEX	.00	-							
SENSATION	.00	.00	-						
DESTROY	-.09	.00	.08	-					
JUST END	-.05	.00	-.06	.12	-				
HUMOR	-.05	.00	.06	-.05	.05	-			
LIKE FRIGHT	-.05	-.02	.02	.04	.04	.00	-		
HALL II	-.02	.01	-.12	.03	.03	.12	.02	-	
FREQ HORR	-.04	-.01	-.07	.04	.04	.06	.01	.01	-

The sum of squared deviations is .10.

Figure 1

A diagram of the path model and path coefficients.



Note: Correlations ≥ .14 are significant at $p \leq .05$. Correlations ≥ .20 are significant at $p \leq .01$.